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IN THE NATION

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Ortega's Bad Trip

President Daniel Ortega Saavedra of Nicaragua may never take a trip more ill advised than his recent pilgrimage to Moscow, immediately after the House of Representatives voted down all proposals for any form of aid to the "contra" guerrillas trying to overthrow the Sandinista Government.

Not that Mr. Ortega, the head of a recognized (even by the Reagan Administration) Government, doesn't have a perfect right to go anywhere he's welcome, any time he wants to, and ask for aid from anyone who'll give it.

And not that those Democrats (and some Republicans) in the House who voted against aid to the contras had any reason to suppose that Mr. Ortega headed a Jeffersonian government, or to act as if they'd just found out that he's a Marxist revolutionary.

Still, Mr. Ortega's timing was wretched; and Democratic members of Congress, already nervous about voting against President Reagan and, in effect, against the attempted overthrow of a Marxist regime in Central America, quickly seized upon the Moscow trip to have it both ways. Throwing up their hands in holy horror because a Marxist journeyed to the Mecca of Marxism, they are eager to balance their ticket with some kind of aid to the contras — "nonlethal," of course, or "humanitarian" and not to be administered by those dreadful cold warriors of the C.I.A.

Whom do they think they're kidding? The issue is not and never has

been the virtue of the Sandinistas, or their political hue, or their links with Havana and Moscow, about which no member of the House can have been in any doubt even before Mr. Ortega set foot in the Kremlin.

The issue is whether the United States should sponsor, arm and finance a guerrilla organization, heavily tainted with survivors from the Somoza regime, the stated goal of which is to overthrow Nicaragua's recognized Government and replace it in power — a guerrilla organization, at that, whose tactics reputable investigators have found sometimes indistinguishable from the terrorism that, in other cases, no one denounces more fervently than Ronald Reagan.

Now that Mr. Ortega has visited Moscow, does the U.S. have more justification for this enterprise? No, because the trip tells us nothing about the Sandinistas not already known when the House voted against aid to the contras.

Are the contras more acceptable now? No, because what Daniel Ortega does has nothing to do with what they are.

So if members of the House believed at the time of the vote that they should not provide aid to the contras, his trip gives them no cause to change their minds — no cause except the headlines it created, which aroused the ever-lurking fear of American politicians that the hard-line public may somehow judge them "soft on Communism."

"Nonlethal" and "humanitarian" aid, on the other hand, is intended to ring less harshly in the ears of whatever softer-line public may have survived the Reagan years. It's all right to send shoes for the bleeding feet of contras, and C-rations for their empty stomachs; but bullets and rifles would offend the sensibilities of those opposed to military interventions, overthrowing governments, and terrorism.

It's still a fraud, whether nonlethal, humanitarian or both. Every dollar Congress appropriates for shoes, food, pay and clothing is a dollar the contra leaders don't have to raise elsewhere — which means that the ample dollars they can get from private sources here and in the Latin countries can and will be spent for weapons and ammunition.

So it's not a matter of what kind of aid Congress should spend taxpayers' money to provide for the contras; it's a question whether aid of any kind should be provided. If it should, Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut has the best idea — \$14 million to relocate and resettle the contras and put an end to the Reagan Administration's proxy war. Don't hold your breath till it happens.